

Describe and Draw: An Exercise in Communication

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Building skills in communication is at the heart of the *Describe and Draw* activity. Participants experience the difficulty of sharing unfamiliar information clearly and concisely – especially in a (slightly) stressful situation.

Participants are paired off. Then the following materials necessary for this exercise per pair:

- 1) Painting if in an art gallery or printed reproduction if in a classroom
- 2) Clipboard, blank copier paper, and pencil
- 3) Two chairs, placed side by side so one person can sit facing the artwork and the other can sit facing the opposite direction

Ask the group of participants to form pairs. Each pair should designate a “describer” and a “listener.” Tell them they are going to do a timed activity centered around communicating about a work of art. Stress that the *listener* should not see the work of art chosen by the describer, nor should they be given any information about the piece. Demonstrate how to set up the chairs so the describer faces the work of art and the listener faces away. It may be helpful to remind the participants that no artistic skill or knowledge is needed for this activity. Invite them to remain open and have fun. Share that more instructions will be given once they are settled in their seats.

Ask the *listener* to keep their eyes on the floor and cover their view as the *describer* guides them to the artwork and helps them sit down **facing away from it**. Hand the listener a clipboard loaded with a few sheets of paper, and a pencil. The describer sits next to the listener.

Explain to the whole group that the describer will have three uninterrupted minutes to tell their listener what the painting looks like but they cannot look at the drawing or talk to the listener. During those three minutes, the listener will use the pencil and paper to create a drawing that captures what they are being told but cannot ask questions. In other words, no communication beyond the spoken description is allowed. Clarify to the listeners that this is NOT about artistic skill or even the final result. Stick figures and simple forms are fine, but they cannot rely on written words to replace the visual elements.

Once the group is settled in, the instructor starts the clock and tells the group to begin. It is important for everyone to start at the same time.

When there is one minute left on the timer, let the participants know. Often the voices of the describers will hasten and rise as they rush to communicate details.

At the end of three minutes, ask the students/participants to stop and put pencils down. Invite the listeners to turn around and look at their artwork and the describers to see how their words were translated into images. This is often the most fun moment of the activity. Allow a few long moments for the pair to share and compare their experiences.

Bring the whole group into a circle and discuss the exercise. Ask: How did it feel to be a *describer*? Was it difficult to communicate what you perceived in the artwork? How did it feel to be a *listener*? Was it easy to understand what was being communicated?

The pairs then switch roles (describer becomes listener and vice versa) and the activity repeats different works of art. This time the group will know what to expect. At the end of three minutes, bring the group together for another debrief.

Ask: How was this round was different? Often, that is the only question needed to lead to a rich discussion, but other fruitful questions include: Did the describers have a different approach having learned from the previous round? Were they more precise in their descriptions? Did the *listeners* also choose a different approach?

The most important question for the group is this: How might this exercise relate to their medical practice? Again, this is often the only question needed to spark a productive and relevant conversation but other questions include: Why is clear and concise communication essential to good medical care? Have they ever had an experience where someone said one thing, but clearly meant another?

While the actual *Describe and Draw* activity takes about fifteen or twenty minutes, the discussion can go on for a long time and ideally that portion will not be rushed. It can open up a rich and rewarding discussion of issues surrounding communication at every level – between medical students and instructors, physicians, nurses, patients, residents, and family members. *Describe and Draw* also demonstrates how being rushed and possibly uncomfortable can impact communication, especially what happens when you have a lot of information to convey in a limited amount of time and what choices must be made.

This activity can be paired with a reflective writing exercise on the qualities/nature of effective and/or ineffective communication.